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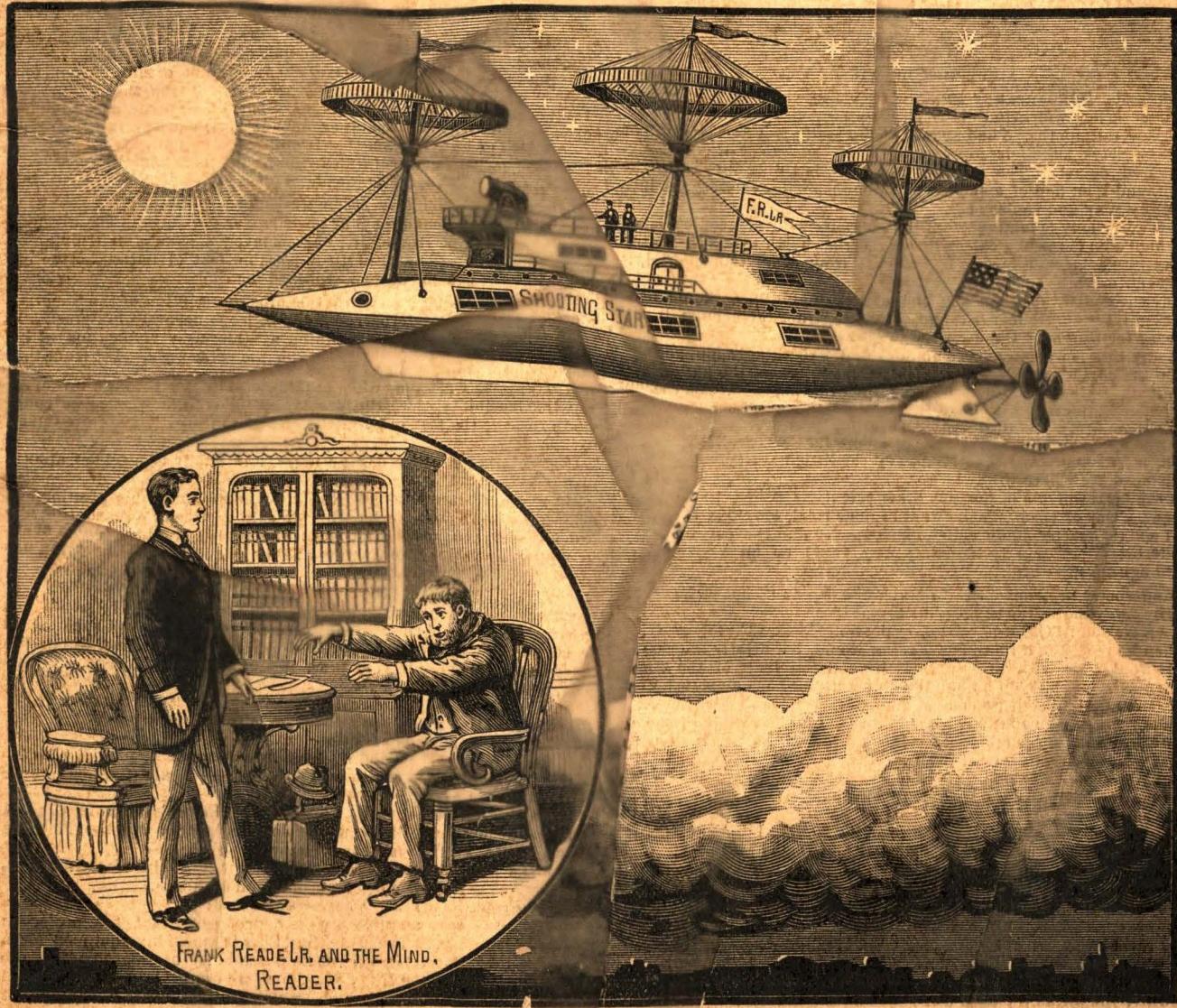
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## Across the Milky Way; OR, Frank Reade, Jr.'s Great Astronomieal Trip With His Air-Ship "The Shooting Star."

By "NONAME."



The earth was far away, and as yet invisible, owing to the mighty bank of fleecy clouds. The white cold rays of the sun shot across the Star's deck. It became plain to the aerial voyagers that they were indeed in another world. A superstitious person would have been deeply impressed.

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# Across the Milky Way;

OR,

## Frank Reade, Jr.'s Great Astronomical Trip With His Air-Ship "The Shooting Star."

By "NONAME,"

Author of "The Mysterious Brand," "The Black Lagoon," "The Desert of Death," etc., etc., etc.

### CHAPTER I.

#### A QUESTION OF SCIENCE.

PROFESSOR DUNDERBERRY DEAN, of the National School of Sciences, was in a perfect whirlwind of perplexity and baffled effort.

For several months he had spent two-thirds of his time at the mirror of the Society's huge telescope, trying to compute the orbit of a newly-discovered comet. The stranger had appeared first almost in the zenith, and then had of a sudden and without apology descended into the Milky Way and vanished.

Now everybody is familiar with that curious field of nebulous matter which clouds the sky on starlit nights from north to south. Owing to its white color and flowing appearance from time immemorial, it has been known as the Milky Way.

Why the comet, by no means of the first magnitude, should have vanished into that immense, almost infinite, tract of nebulae, it was not easy for Professor Dunderberry to guess.

At any rate it was an uncere monious and exceedingly inopportune act on the comet's part. Just at the moment when the appellation "Dunderberry comet" would have become a name of every science teacher in the world, yielding the changed its course and plunged headlong into an area of obscurity.

It was a most exasperating turn of affairs for the professor. As a result he lost many nights of sleep, and the little bald spot on the top of his head grew perceptibly larger.

In the height of his misfortune other scientists called to offer condolence. One of them, a somewhat zealous rival, laughingly said:

"I should charter an air ship and go up and find the comet's orbit, Dunderberry. A trip to the Milky Way would be an exploit which would agitate the world."

Dunderberry pretended not to notice the sarcasm, but as he turned weary away the words rang in his brain:

"An air ship! Oh, if it were only possible!"

Then he recollected that such a thing would be utterly impossible. What would support a foreign body beyond the limit of the atmosphere—what would keep human life an instant at such a height? Moreover, the air ship itself was as yet a chimera.

Thus reflecting he continued his blind and useless study of the exasperating mass of nebulous matter, hoping all the while that the comet would suddenly reveal itself.

But it did not do so and time went on. Dunderberry grew hopeless and was about to abandon the quest in despair, when an unlooked-for thing happened.

One day while making observations for spots on the sun, he was given a startling surprise when a strange body floated across the range of the telescope. For an instant he thought of an aerolite, but its progress was too slow.

He at once focused on the passing object and saw that it was very near. In fact but a few miles away.

As revealed in the glass he gazed upon it in utter amazement. Then the words escaped his lips:

"Great Aristotle! It is—as I live it is an air ship!"

Swiftly the air ship passed away beyond the horizon. Dunderberry followed it as far as he could with the telescope.

Then he burst from the observatory tower and rushed into the reading-room. He eagerly scanned the files of the daily papers.

"Surely the newspaper must have an account of anything so unusual!" he had thought.

When he mentioned the matter to others of his associates, they declared that they had seen nothing of the sort, and several whispered behind his back an opinion that Dean was going daft.

But the following day furnished a complete vindication. A local newspaper contained the following account:

"Quite a remarkable spectacle was afforded our citizens yesterday when the air ship Shooting Star passed over our town. The inventor and owner, Frank Reade, Jr., has achieved a wonderful triumph in aerial science, and the hitherto impossible feat of aerial navigation seems to have become an accomplished fact."

More followed, and a somewhat detailed description of the Shooting Star was given. Dunderberry read it with the deepest of interest.

He felt a secret thrill of triumph at this clear vindication of his claim, and enjoyed the discomfiture of his colleagues. Yet from that moment he was in a state of unrest.

Wherever he went the vision of the air ship ran through his mind, and the feasibility of a trip to some altitude from whence he could gain recover the lost orbit of the comet continually suggested itself to him.

It gave him no peace day or night, and finally he decided upon a plan of action.

He wrote a letter to Frank Reade, Jr., explaining his position and asking if it were possible for the air ship to ascend a reasonable distance toward the space limit from whence better observations could be made. In which event would he for pecuniary consideration undertake such a contract.

The reply came immediately back in the shape of a telegram:

"PROFESSOR DUNDERBERRY DEAN:—Your project interests me greatly. Not for pecuniary consideration would I accept such a contract, but if at all, for the benefit of science. I will meet you at the Academy of Sciences in your town on Monday next at 3 P. M., if agreeable, to talk the matter over."

"FRANK READE, JR."

Professor Dean's face was radiant as he read this message. Already he felt the possibility of success.

It would be to him indeed a joyful thing should it be proved possible to gain the necessary altitude. So he waited anxiously for the hour of appointment.

When Monday came there appeared at the Scientific Institute a tall, handsome and distinguished looking young man. This was Frank Reade, Jr., the famous inventor.

In a few moments he was deeply in discussion with Professor Dunderberry. They were in close consultation for hours.

When Frank Reade, Jr., went away he said:

"You may rest assured, my dear professor, that the project is wholly practicable. The Shooting Star is especially equipped for a trip even into space. It will not be possible for us to accomplish the infinite distance to the Milky Way, but we can go a long way toward it, and then cross it at a distance which will be vastly advantageous for observations of the kind you desire to make."

"Good!" cried Dunsterberry. "Of course I know it would be impossible to reach the Milky Way, but as you say, we may take a trip across its course, which will accomplish all that I shall desire."

"How soon do you desire to start?" asked Frank.

"At the earliest day to suit your convenience."

"I can start in three days."

"Good! I will report at Readestown in three days!"

With this the interview ended. A short while later the train took Frank Reade, Jr., to his home.

Readestown was a pretty little city on a navigable river among hills. Here Frank Reade, Jr., had built his machine works and lived in most comfortable style.

For his inventions had made him very wealthy. His two faithful attaches, Pomp, the negro, and Barney O'Shea, the Irishman, always accompanied him on his many trips.

As the inventor of the submarine boat, the electric horses, and other wonderful things, Frank Reade, Jr.'s fame was assured the world over.

Arriving at Readestown, Frank went at once to the works and entered his private office. He touched a bell, and in a few moments a comical-looking little Irishman appeared on the threshold.

"Barney," said Frank, "in what condition is the Shooting Star?"

"In fine condition, sor," replied the Celt, ducking his head.

"Are there supplies aboard?"

"Enough for a month, sor."

"Is that all?"

"Yis, sir."

"Well, I want you and Pomp to at once get to work and fit the Star up for a long cruise—perhaps a year."

Barney looked astonished.

"Shure, sor—"

"Well?"

"All roight, sor."

"Wait!" said Frank, with a smile. "I can see that you are curious. For your satisfaction I will say that we shall in three days depart on a trip into space, in fact if possible, as far as the Milky Way."

The Celt's knees shook.

"If yez plaze, sor—"

"Well?"

"That's a long ways up into the air, is it not, sor?"

"It is."

"Right ferninst the stars, sor?"

"Well, yes."

"All roight, sor—but—"

"Speak out!"

"Phwat the devil wud become av us up there av we should foind Paradise, sor?"

Frank laughed heartily.

"You ought to look upon that as a pleasant possibility," he said. "You might be able then to speak with dear friends long since departed—"

"Devil a bit!" said the Celt with keen humor. "Shure there's mony a bad enemy waitin' for me up there, an' shure they'd make it hot for Barney O'Shea if they caught him in paradise!"

"Well!" said Frank, "if you feel that way about it, I would not go. It is a long and risky trip. We may descend to the earth in a shapeless mass. I will give you the option to go or not as you choose!"

"Whurroo!" cried the Celt, excitedly, dancing about. "Do yez think I'd shtay to home, sor! Not if the devil himself was there to meet me!"

"So I thought," said Frank with a smile. "And now be off and get everything ready!"

## CHAPTER II.

### THE SHOOTING STAR.

BARNEY'S first impulse was to find Pomp. He knew that the coon was somewhere in the machine works. Men were hurrying hither and thither across the yard as he emerged from the office.

Barney made his way toward a high arched building with a trussed roof. The great doors were open, and there, upon a low platform, rested the famous air ship, Shooting Star.

Just as Barney reached the entrance, he heard a voice raised in rollicking song. It was a plantation melody, and Pomp was the singer. The Celt grinned and chuckled.

"Begorra, he's feelin' foine," he muttered. "Shure, it's meself as will take that out av him roight quick!"

Barney entered the store-house softly. He saw the coon engaged in scouring the brass railing of the air ship.

He was rubbing diligently and singing lustily, so that he did not notice the approach of Barney. The Celt came silently up in his rear.

When but a few feet from the coon, Barney let out a cry which was something horrible to hear. It could be compared to nothing better than a cross between the bray of a mule and the wail of a banshee.

The effect upon Pomp was comical as well as startling.

He made a spasmodic leap forward, stumbled and stood on his head for the space of a second, and then tumbled clean over the air ship's rail to the ground below.

The box of liquid polish saturated his wool and trickled down his neck. Terror was depicted in every line of his comical black face as he scrambled to his feet and started to flee.

"Ghostsies!" he gasped.

Then he caught sight of Barney, which at once changed the complexion of things. The reaction was irresistibly funny to watch.

The Celt was convulsed with laughter. The coon for a moment looked crestfallen and perplexed. Then anger got the best of him.

"Golly!" he ejaculated, as he made an effort to shake the polish out of his wool; "neber did heer sich a fng as dat afo' in mah life! Did yo' make dat noise yo'se', lish?"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the Celt. "Be be sowl, it was the funniest thing I ever see in me loife!"

Then the coon was angry, and no mistake. His eyes glittered like black beads.

"Huh!" he ejaculated. "Berry funny fo' yo', no doubt. Mebbe yo' fink it was fun fo' dis chile! Sakes alibet! I fix yo' fo' dat, sah!"

With which he made a quick leap over the rail and a rush for Barney.

The Celt was so overcome with mirth that he did not succeed in getting out of the way very quickly. As a result the coon caught him.

He caught him in the rear full tilt, and the effect was almost as funny as Pomp's *coup-de-grace*. Barney turned a complete somersault.

When he picked himself up the coon was upon him like a tiger. The Celt grappled with him, and a lively tussle followed.

They tugged and strained, with little advantage on either side for a good while. But not until both were completely exhausted did they desist.

Then they picked themselves up, and retired to opposite sides of the air ship's deck.

Barney rubbed his bruises and Pomp combed out his wool. As soon as he could get his breath, the Celt asked:

"Are yez sathisfied?"

"Yah; I is, chile," replied the coon. "I reckon we're about square."

"All roight; thin I'll tell yez some news."

"Who am dat?"

"Shure Misster Frank has given ordhers fer a year's supplies aboard the air ship."

The coon's eyes rolled.

"Yo' don't say, honey?"

"Shure I do."

"Den we am in fo' a long trip."

"Phwe-re do yez suppose?"

"I done fink it am to de Norf Pole."

"Nuh!"

"Who am it den?"

"Shure it's to Paradise," said Barney, pointing upward.

The coon looked at Barney as if he thought him crazy. Then he said:

"Huh! dat ain'a funny joke at all, sah!"

"Bejabbers it's no joke, but the truth," averred Barney.

And the Celt consumed some time in convincing the black man that the air ship was really bound for the Milky Way. At length he made him understand it.

Then the two jokers lost no time in at once getting to work on the equipping of the Star for the long, mid-air cruise.

As the Shooting Star rested in the store-house she presented an imposing appearance, and now that the opportunity offers, it might be well to give the reader a fair description of the great invention.

She was long and slender in hull, somewhat of the cigar shape, and built of thinly rolled alloy of aluminum and steel. This gave her strength, coupled with buoyancy.

The structure of the cabin, in which the voyagers would make their living rooms, rose above the deck with rounded roof, on top of which was a hurricane deck protected by a guard rail. In this structure, forward, was the pilot house with its electric key-board and its plate glass windows.

There were heavy plate glass observation windows in the cabin, and also in the lower part or hold of the air ship. These gave plenty of light.

Three revolving steel masts supported as many light, but wide-bladed rotascopes. These driven at tremendous speed by electric engines furnished the ascending power of the Star. At her stern was a large, four-bladed propeller. A powerful search-light was placed on the hurricane deck.

The interior of the Shooting Star was a revelation.

There were the usual number of living rooms, the main cabin, the dining salon, state-rooms and a cooking galley. Forward was the pilot house, and directly under it the engine-room.

In the lower hold were the store-rooms where were kept the supplies and other necessities. The Star was in all respects thoroughly equipped.

The electric engines were a marvel.

Motive power was furnished by a system of storage which was purely the invention of Frank Reade, Jr., enabling the compressing of tremendous power in a small compass.

Throughout the Shooting Star was furnished like a miniature palace. A trip aboard her was certainly a wonderful bit of pleasure.

Frank knew that he would at times be compelled to ascend into high atmosphere where it would be difficult for human life to be sustained.

The rarity of this upper atmosphere is so intense that no human being can hope to live there. To guard against this dreadful possibility, Frank had perfected a remarkable invention.

While making a study of chemistry, he had hit upon a combination of certain chemicals which, confined in a generator, would manufacture the purest of oxygen.

He had placed one of these chemical generators aboard the air ship. From its tubes and valves extended to every part of the cabins.

The windows and doors were so constructed that they could be hermetically sealed. Thus the voyagers were enabled to live confined in the cabin in an artificial atmosphere as pure as could be desired.

This overcame at once the danger of suffocation from any rarity of the upper atmosphere. It was the same principle as applied to Frank's submarine boats.

The young inventor had long made a study of the air currents and meteorological conditions of the upper world. He was a deep student of astronomy.

As a result, he had formed many conclusions totally at variance with the commonly accepted theories of the average astronomer.

The planets and their relations to each other had formed a special subject. It was not long before he reached a well based conclusion that there was an electrical affinity between the earth and the firmament above, so-called.

This discovery led him to consider the possibility of sending an electric message to the moon or to any other not too distant heavenly body.

That this line of electric affinity extended through space, he did not doubt. The system of telegraphy might easily be established, therefore, if a satisfactory response could be gained. That is, if someone at the other end of the imaginary wire had the necessary apparatus to receive and answer the call.

As this was exceedingly improbable, Frank had dropped any further exhaustive study of the matter. But now that he was to take a trip into space, naturally the question recurred to him.

Of course the young inventor could only conjecture as to how far he might be able to travel into space with the air ship by means of the propeller.

Whether the action of the propeller in the supposed vacuum would be sufficient to propel the air ship or not could only be determined by actual test.

If it could not, then little would be gained beyond the slight advantage of an observation of the Milky Way at a height of ten or twelve miles possibly above the earth.

But a startling idea had occurred to Frank.

"If, in the vacuum of the upper world, there existed the invisible and mysterious element called electricity, why was it not possible for him to create a sensitive disc or plate to gather it from the atmosphere, and in this means get control of some powerful current which might perhaps in the twinkling of an eye transpose the air ship to any distant point, though it were thousands of miles away?"

When it was remembered that the resistance of the atmosphere did not exist in that mighty space, and that the air ship would suffer no damage therefore in such transit, it looked more and more feasible.

But there was another risk which Frank considered with a positive chill.

Suppose the air ship should fall within the circle of gravity of some planet or other body in that far-away firmament. Would the voyagers not be forever suspended to meet death from starvation, and to remain there for eternity?

It was a tremendous subject to grapple with. But Frank Reade, Jr., was ready to sacrifice life if need be, to accomplish an invention. He did not retire that night, and before dawn came he had perfected a curious-looking disc of steel and copper with a conglomeration of dynamos and wires.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE CRANK'S VISIT.

FRANK was jubilant over his new invention, which he was pleased to call the attractomotor.

Of course there might exist conditions which would preclude its practicability. But he had confidence in the success of the new invention.

He placed it aboard the Shooting Star, where it excited the curiosity of Barney and Pomp.

Meanwhile the Star had been made wholly ready for the great trip.

Frank received a wire from Professor Dunderberry that he would be on hand at an early hour the next day.

Naturally the report of the proposed expedition spreading through the land created intense interest.

On the morning of the day set for the departure a man of peculiar appearance presented himself at the machine works. Barney met him at the gate.

"I want to see Mr. Frank Reade, Jr.," he said.

Barney looked at him critically.

He saw a short, thick-set man, rather shabbily clad, of light complexion, and with vacillating blue eyes and a stubby growth of red beard. He carried in his hand a small valise.

"Begorra!" thought the Celt, while his hair began to rise on end, "he looks a mighty sight like an Anarchist. Shure, he'll be after blowin' all av us to kingdom come."

So he was exceedingly circumspect, and said:

"Av yez will cum around to-morrow it's loikely yez kin see Misther Reade."

Now the Celt knew that Frank Reade, Jr., and the air ship would be in space by that time. It was a clever attempt at evasion.

But the fellow looked keenly at Barney, and said rather sternly:

"You know better than that, sir. The air ship sails to-day!"

"How do yez know that?" sniffed Barney, testily.

"It is announced!"

"Is your business important?"

"Important or not, it is nothing to you!" retorted the suspected Anarchist. "I have come here to see Frank Reade, Jr., and I am not going away until I do see him. So you will oblige me by taking in my card!"

With this he tipped Barney a bit of pasteboard. The Celt read:

RINALDO RAY,

Astrologer and Second Sight Seer,

No. — BROADWAY, NEW YORK.

Several times the Celt read this announcement with interest. Then he muttered:

"Shure he must be wan av thim scientists, an' mebbe he has business wid Misther Frank after all."

Then aloud:

"Do yez know Professor Dean, sor?"

"Certainly! We were classmates. Be off with you, for I am in a tremendous hurry."

"All roight, sor."

Barney entered Frank's private office and placed the card before him. The young inventor glanced at it, and in an amazed manner, said:

"I have no time to see him. I do not know him. Probably he is only another of those cranks."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Reade, he is not a crank!"

Astounded, Barney whirled about. The sight seer, Rinaldo Ray, stood before them.

-He had silently followed Barney all the way, and at Frank's words proceeded to force the interview.

The young inventor glanced at him and his face flushed with anger.

"This is my private office," he said. "I do not receive visitors here!"

"Pardon me for the intrusion," said Ray, urbanely. "It was my only hope of seeing you. I would have been refused an audience if I had used the usual methods."

"Was it then so urgent?"

"More so than words can tell," cried Ray, eagerly. "I have not come to supplicate or to beg, but to ask of you to lend your aid to a science than which there is no greater on earth to-day!"

Frank looked keenly at the other. Certainly his personal appearance was against him.

His instant conclusion was that the fellow was a crank of the most dangerous type. How to get rid of him safely was a question.

But Frank quickly made up his mind how to act.

He decided to first hear the fellow's plea, then get rid of him with a conditional promise. This seemed the safest thing to do.

So he motioned to Barney to leave the room. The Celt looked inquiringly at Frank but obeyed.

"Sit down, Mr. Ray," said Frank.

"Thank you."

There was a gleam of joy in the scientific crank's eyes. He trembled like an aspen.

"Now," said Frank, curtly, "you must understand that my time is very valuable."

"I understand that, and that your air ship sails to-day. So knowing that you would surely grant my request I have come all prepared."

"Ahl!" said Frank, raising his eyebrows. "Pray be explicit."

"I will do so, Mr. Reade. For years I have made a most exhaustive study of astrology and second sight. I have accomplished many wonderful things with my remarkable vision, which is a Heavenly gift. I have been able to solve many of the mysteries of the future state."

"What is that to me?" asked Frank, brusquely.

"Only this: You are reputed the friend of science. It is to gratify a scientific man that you are now about to embark on this trip to the Milky Way. Am I not right?"

"We will allow it!"

"Very well! The end which he hopes to gain is, in importance when compared with mine, as a mustard seed to a mountain."

"An elaborate comparison," said Frank. "What warrants it?"

"Well, he seeks only the orbit of a wretched little comet, which discovery can benefit nobody. My object, if accomplished, as it will be if you lend me aid, will benefit mankind as no other discovery has done since the beginning of the world."

"Explain your theory."

"I will do so. You are aware, of course, that the region of space into which you are going has from time immemorial been regarded as the Nirvana of the heathen Hindoo, the heaven of the infidel Turk, and the Paradise of the Christian. We are taught to look there for the spirits of our friends and their friends. It is the sphere to which we are relegated after death."

"Now, but few of these spirits find their way back through our atmosphere to the earth. They are sometimes recalled by our science, but hampered and unable to materialize or communicate very sensibly with us."

"My hope is this—that with my gift of second sight being right in the region where is the spirit abode, I shall be able to see and communicate with all who are there. The benefits to be gained are immeasurable. The grave must then give up its secrets, the dead will be able to give testimony, and the entire science of life and religion will be revolutionized. It is a glorious contemplation."

Ray waxed eloquent and excited. It was plain that he was heart and soul in the project.

To Frank it seemed the most absurd of chimeras. He regarded Ray as one of the worst of cranks.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Ray," he said, politely, "but I am obliged to refuse you the assistance you ask. I can carry no more passengers aboard my air ship."

The sight seer's face fell. A look of bitter disappointment shone in his eyes.

"Do not say that," he pleaded. "You cannot refuse, in view of the great end to be gained."

"I fail to see it. I do not believe in second sight, or spiritualism, or anything of the kind."

"Then you have no faith in my theory?"

"I am sorry to say that I have not."

"But what if I prove to you that it is true?"

"How will you do that?"

Ray looked at Frank keenly.

"The gift of second sight is a powerful one," he said. "It enables me to look into your soul and see what is there. Concentrate your mind upon a certain thing and I will tell you what your thoughts are."

"Very well," said Frank.

Ray leaned back in his chair and his head fell forward upon his breast. His features grew pale, and his eyes like those of a corpse. He mumbled incoherently, stretched his arms out a few times and then suddenly regained himself.

His color came back and he sat up quickly. His eyes now gleamed like diamonds.

"I have seen it!" he said.

"Well?" asked Frank.

"Your innermost mind. You have been repeating these words: 'How shall I get rid of this crank?'"

Frank was astonished.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed.

"Am I not right?" asked Ray, eagerly.

"You are," replied the young inventor, bluntly. "You are a keen fellow, Ray. How did you do that?"

"Easy enough! It was by my gift of second sight."

For a moment there was an impulse uppermost in Frank's mind to accede to the request of the mind reader. It would be but one more in the party, and after all this fellow was interesting and perhaps harmless.

But as he looked at Ray again his heart forsook him. A better type of the dangerous crank he had never seen.

No, it would certainly never be safe to take this fellow with them. At any moment some insane freak might come upon him to plunge all into certain death.

Ray was watching him narrowly. Finally he said:

"What have you decided, Mr. Reade?"

Frank looked him squarely in the eye.

"I must stand by my decision!" he said.

Something like a groan welled up from Ray's breast. He arose and walked to the door.

"You are making a grievous error!" he said. "This is the one great chance of a lifetime to render science the greatest benefit ever heard of. You will regret it when too late!"

With this the mind-reader passed out of the room. Frank drew a breath of relief.

He had got rid of the fellow far easier than he had hoped for. But something impressed him that he had not seen the last of Rinaldo Ray.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### UNDER WAY.

PROFESSOR DUNDERBERRY arrived right on time.

He brought with him a number of trunks with scientific apparatus and a powerful portable telescope.

All these were placed aboard the air ship. Then he went to dine with Frank Reade, Jr., for the last time on earth for a good while.

Frank then took occasion to tell him of his experience with the mind reader, Ray.

Dunderberry listened with interest and laughed heartily.

"I hardly think it would be safe to take such a character along," he said. "He might array some of the spirits of old time pirates against us up there and seize the ship."

"Well, he was the worst specimen of a crank that I ever heard of," said Frank, "though I must say that his mind reading trick was a good one."

"The trick of a juggler or a magician," said Dunderberry; "there are plenty of those fellows in the world. You meet them everywhere. You did well in getting rid of him."

"So I think."

The hour of departure came.

The air ship had been brought out into the yard, and Barney and Pomp patrolled the deck. A large crowd waited outside to see the ascension.

Everything had been attended to; Frank had seen that the Star was in complete readiness.

All his affairs in Readestown were adjusted, and at the last moment he and Dunderberry stepped aboard the Star.

Frank gave the signal to Barney.

The Celt pressed an electric button. Instantly the electric machinery began to buzz, and the air ship sprung aloft.

Up she floated gracefully, like a great bird. Up and up, higher and higher, until Readestown looked like a collection of pygmy houses.

Then she shot into a great fleecy mass of clouds, and the earth was shut from view altogether.

Frank and Dunderberry remained on deck until this happened. Then the young inventor said:

"Come into the cabin, Dean. I want to show you the attractomotor."

The scientist complied. Frank then explained to him his theories regarding the electric forces in or beyond space.

Dunderberry was intensely interested.

"By Scipio!" he exclaimed. "You are a genius, Frank Reade, Jr. That excels anything I ever heard of. It is simply a wonderful theory and if it proves compatible—why, anything is possible hereafter."

"I believe that it will be successful in a measure," said Frank; "at least the experiment is worth trying."

"Indeed it is!"

Meanwhile the air ship had risen to the height of several miles. Progress now became slower.

The earth could not be seen, for beneath them were immense fields of white clouds.

The sun shone upon them with a whiter light, and involuntarily Dunderberry turned up his coat collar.

The air was keen and brisk. It was clear as crystal and yet oppressive.

There were none in the party but breathed hoarsely. There seemed a fearful pressure on the chest.

Suddenly Dunderberry felt a stream of blood gently trickling from the corner of his mouth. The pressure was too great for his lungs and he sought the refuge of the cabin.

Frank looked at the gauge and said:

"We may as well seal the doors and windows. Another mile and it would distress us!"

This was quickly done. Then the chemical generator was put to work and the party breathed easily once more.

But the windows and deck now began to quiver with a white frost. It grew almost to the depth of a half inch on the pilot house rail.

It was a still awful cold and by the outside thermometer it was seen that the mercury was down into the bulb and could go no lower.

The electric heaters, however, kept the artificial atmosphere of the cabin good and warm.

"This cold will abate when we get beyond into space!" said Frank. "It is only a zone in itself and the heat of the sun will soon reach us again."

This prediction came true.

The further into space the air ship went the higher grew the temperature. Soon the frost vanished from the windows.

It was yet cold, and the gauge showed that the air was of the thinnest kind. It would not support human life.

Despite the fact that the rotoscopes were driven at full speed, they were a whole hour in rising the next mile.

Higher and higher into space they were rising. After a while the air ship became stationary.

The scene presented was a strange one.

Lacking the chemical elements of the atmosphere to deceive the human eye, the sun now showed its true color which was white. Stars and planets all looked the same.

Anchored in space.

It was a startling reflection, and gave the voyagers a curious sensation. But it was true.

The earth was far away, and as yet invisible, owing to the mighty bank of fleecy clouds. The white cold rays of the sun shot across the Star's deck.

It became plain to the aerial voyagers that they were indeed in another world. A superstitious person would have been deeply impressed.

In the clear transparency of that upper world, everything had an unreal almost ghostly look. Even the visages of the voyagers, when they stood in the sunlight, were white and ghastly.

"If Rinaldo Ray was only here now," said Frank, "he would insist upon calling from this space the spirits of departed ones, if he could."

"Humph," said Dunderberry, "that is very well put. If he could!"

"Bejabbers," cried Barney, "it's not meself as wants anything to do wid the spirits av dead people. Shure, it's hard enough to get along wid 'em whin they're alive!"

"Doubtless that is true in many cases," laughed Frank, "but the question now is what next?"

"Ay, what next?" asked Dunderberry.

"Can you take a satisfactory observation from here?" asked Frank.

"To a certain extent, yes," answered the scientist. "Of course I have only space before me now. Vision should be clearer."

"Then we will remain here!"

"For the present."

"And then——"

"If I am successful in locating the orbit of the comet I see no need in our attempting further encroachment upon space. In fact, my object will have been gained and I shall be anxious to return to the earth."

"But if not——"

"If not," said Dunderberry calmly; "then I suppose we will try the wonderful power of the attractomotor. I am not afraid to use it."

"In any case," repeated Frank, "you would not fear the experiment?"

"No!"

"Then—we will in any case try the attractomotor. I am anxious to learn myself if it will work!"

"Very good!" cried Dunderberry.

"If it does not work——"

"Then it is a failure. We have done no harm and can return to the earth."

"Ah, but suppose it works just enough to land us in space and anchor us there for all time."

Dunderberry knit his brows.

"Is there any possibility of that?" he asked.

"A great possibility!"

The professor shrugged his shoulders.

"So be it!" he said. "I cannot better sacrifice my life than in an experiment at once so unusual and so grand."

"Then you are with us?"

"To the end!"

This terminated the discussion. The long day finally came to a close.

As good fortune had it the night found all in good spirits. The professor's heavy telescope was mounted on the upper deck where an enclosed space was built.

Soon the entire Heavens lay like a vast map before the scientist. The planets one after another were plainly visible, and the white path of the Milky Way showed up vividly.

"Grand!" ejaculated the distinguished astronomer. "We could not have conditions more favorable!"

He focused the various sections of the Milky Way one after another. Not until daybreak did his labor cease.

Then he threw himself down upon a couch in the cabin. For several hours he lay there like one in a stupor.

When he finally arose he said:

"No, use, Frank."

"Then you were not successful?" asked the young inventor.

"Not in the least, although it was much easier to penetrate the nebulous matter at this altitude. I need to be much nearer. I should say thousands of miles."

"Hum!" was all Frank said.

He went to the observation window and looked out.

Then he gave a sharp cry.

"Look!" he exclaimed; "have you ever seen anything more wonderful?"

All looked as directed and beheld a surprising sight. The clouds, so many miles below, were dispelled and now the earth was visible.

But it was as a mighty irregular shaped disc with a pale bluish tint over it. Not anything more was distinguishable.

"That is queer!" exclaimed Frank, in great surprise. "How do you explain it, professor?"

The scientist looked puzzled.

"I agree with you that it is odd," he said.

"At a distance of only ten miles we ought to be able to discern large objects, such as lakes and mountains on the earth's surface?" asked Frank.

"We ought to."

"How do you explain it? You are a man of science."

"Possibly it is owing to a condition of the atmosphere," replied Dean. "You know we are in space!"

For a moment all seemed inclined to accept this view of the matter. But a thought suddenly struck Frank.

He gazed at the earth closely.

Then he looked at the sun which was now quite visible beyond the earth's horizon. It looked half as large as the earth.

Then he flew to the gauge. For a moment he turned deadly pale and was unable to speak. Then he articulated:

"It is explained. We are flying through space, God knows where, and the earth is every moment getting farther away from us."

## CHAPTER V.

### ADVENTURES IN SPACE.

It was an astounding as well as terrifying reflection.

If they were being carried through space, what strange force was carrying them? What law of attraction or gravitation? What meteoric force?

Were they simply falling for lack of support, and would they continue to fall until plunged like an aerolite into the atmosphere of some planet or other heavenly body?

Or would they, like the comet, describe an orbit in the heavens for time eternal?

All these questions flashed through the brains of the excited voyagers in kaleidoscopic order.

No wonder that all clung to the window railing, with white, pallid faces. No wonder that they looked back to the rapidly receding earth with an indescribable yearning and horrible despair.

"God help us!" groaned Frank.

"Mither Mary preserve us!" sighed Barney.

"De good Lor' save us!" whimpered Pomp.

But Dunderberry Dean said nothing.

With his pencil and note book he was making rapid calculations, casting glances ever and anon at the stars which were now plain, even though it was sunlight everywhere.

He seemed quite cool and unconcerned.

"Venus—Mercury in transit—the moon obscured!" he muttered. "At this rate the Milky Way—"

Then the words died out on his lips in an unintelligible murmur. When he came out of his reverie he saw Frank sitting at the window. The young inventor was calm, but a trifle pale.

"Have you any idea where we are going to, professor?" he asked.

"We are drifting in space."

"Drifting?"

"Exactly!"

"I should say we were being hurled at the rate of a thousand miles a minute. The earth is getting away from us pretty fast."

"Well, yes!"

"Do you think we'll ever get back to it?"

Dean was reflective.

"Perhaps not," he said, indifferently.

"Why do you act as if you did not care whether we will or not?" said Frank in surprise.

The professor smiled.

"I have decided to yield up my life for the benefit of science," he said.

"But what good will it ever do if you never get back to the earth to impart your discoveries?" asked Frank.

"Ah, that is the only thing which perplexes me," declared Dunderberry. "And I can assure you it is a matter of great concern. Yet it is likely that some time this air ship will be hurled back to the earth, in which case my papers may be found."

"Indeed!"

"But if they are never found, I shall myself soon learn more of the secrets of the stellar world than have ever been solved since the world began."

Frank felt like saying that this would be poor satisfaction. But he wisely refrained.

Meanwhile, the great disc of the earth seemed to grow smaller and smaller, while the sun became larger and seemed stationary. The strange illusion was then accorded them that the earth was flying around them, and they in turn around the sun.

Everything in the stellar world seemed transposed. The great constellations were in different quarters and constantly changing.

This was easily understood.

They were a revolving body by themselves now, independent of the earth. Of course their orbit was not the same.

For aught they knew this headlong plunge into space might land them in Saturn or Mars, or perhaps in the moon.

In such an event the impact would probably deprive them of any possibility of life after getting there. Words cannot describe the sensations experienced by all.

But for hours none had thought of rest.

Exhausted nature, however, could stand no more, and accordingly Frank and the professor turned in. Barney and Pomp were left on guard.

The Celt and the coon crouched down by the pilot-house window and watched the sky curiously.

It could be truly said that neither felt exactly comfortable.

"Fo' massy's sakes!" groaned Pomp. "Wha' ebber am gwine to become ob us, chilef? Kin yo' tell?"

"Be jabers, av I ead I'd mighty quick do so!" replied Barney. "I've been in many a hard scrape in me own toime, but divil a wan loike this!"

"Does yo' know wha' I fink?"

"Phwat?"

"We'se nebbur gwine to git back to Readestown no mo'."

"Begorria, I'm afraid that's thure!"

"An', Marse Frank, I believe he done fink de same fink!"

"Yez ar right!"

"Den' wha' am gwine to become ob us?"

"Bad cess to that crazy professor," muttered Barney. "We'd niver have come here but fer the loikes av him!"

"Yo' am right, honey. Mebbe he kin tel de way to git back to de earth."

"Bejabers, he acts to me as if he didn't ever want to."

Thus the two jokers condoled with each other during the long hours that Frank and Dean slept.

After a time, however, Frank appeared and relieved them. They were tired enough to accept the opportunity to sleep.

Later in the day the professor came up from his state-room. He was fully restored and eager to resume his astronomical work.

The earth had grown appreciably smaller, for it was plain that they were receding rapidly away from it.

The Milky Way lay like a snow drift in the far distance. Beyond it undiscovered planets could be seen.

The lost comet was also made visible, and Dunderberry quickly computed its orbit.

But there were now visible other comets. Some were of gigantic size and could be seen to move swiftly in their course.

Dean fairly revelled in his opportunities.

He covered dozens of pages with his notes and made diagrams and drawings without number.

Many suspected truths were established, many accepted facts were proven but fallacies.

Thus far their course through space had been undisturbed. No accident or incident of a dangerous sort had occurred.

But now, of a sudden, Frank Reade, Jr., gave a cry of alarm.

He had been making observations directly overhead, and suddenly saw what seemed like a great ball of fire falling directly upon them.

"Look out!" he shouted. "Heaven help us! We shall be dashed to fragments by that dreadful aerolite."

The professor looked up.

"It is an aerolite!" he cried, "and just at this moment we are in its course."

"Shure, sor, shall I set the propeller going?" asked Barney.

"No," replied Frank.

He knew that this would be of no use. Being in space, propulsive power could not be employed.

But Dean cried:

"Have no fear! We are safe!"

"But the aerolite—"

"It is falling just as we are only in another direction. We shall be out of its course before it gets here!"

The professor pulled out his watch. When first seen, the aerolite had seemed the size of a cannon ball.

But now with its halo of light and mist it was as big as a house. A minute elapsed before it shot past.

A full half mile distant it sped downward and began to gradually grow smaller. The voyagers all drew a breath of relief.

"Of course we shall have these risks to run," said Dean, coolly.

"If it had struck us—"

"We should have known but little of what would follow."

"Death!"

"Of course!"

Frank gazed after the rapidly vanishing aerolite and asked:

"Will it fall on the earth?"

"Not unless it changes its course," replied Dean. "It should pass the other side and may make a long transit of years to some far away planet. Of course it will fall on the first object which comes in its course. In other words if it falls within any line of gravity or attraction."

"Ugh!" said Frank, with a shiver. "I am glad that we escaped it!"

"So am I! But we may see many of these fellows—may even be struck by one! Ah!"

All gave an exclamation. What seemed like a shower of sparks was falling about the air ship.

Upon the steel hull there rattled something like hailstones or gravel. For a moment all were alarmed except Professor Dean.

He only smiled and said:

"Don't be afraid! It is only an offshoot of small particles from the aerolite. It will do us no harm."

Fear abated. In fact from this moment the voyagers grew more hardened to peril.

They even began to view the situation with resignation if not complete equanimity.

"What can't be cured must be endured," said Frank. "If we come out of this scrape all right, so be it. If not—why we will do the best we can."

"Which is philosophy and common sense," agreed the professor.

Save for certain superstitious fancies, Barney and Pomp did not grumble at the state of affairs.

It was fortunate for them that they had unbounded faith in Frank Reade, Jr.'s ability to bring them out safely. Not for a moment did they doubt this.

But one night Barney lying in his bunk heard a strange sound beyond the partition leading into the hold.

It resembled a human groan, and then several long-drawn breaths. He listened intently.

The sounds were not repeated. Barney went into the hold, but no person was there.

They were all on deck. The Celt experienced a chill. To his mind there was some strange warning from a supernatural source.

He communicated the matter to Pomp, enlarging upon it necessarily. And this laid the foundation for what became to them a period of mystery and terror.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

BARNEY and Pomp now became victims of a strange indefinable terror. All sorts of myths and imaginative fancies filled their heads.

Believing themselves in that region of space which is supposed to be the abode of wandering spirits, they fancied all sorts of things. The least unusual noise or unexpected incident threw them into a paroxysm.

Then strange things began to happen aboard the air ship.

Once in laying the cloth in the dining salon, Pomp had placed a fine bottle of champagne by Frank's plate. A moment later, on returning from the cooking galley, it was gone.

Not the slightest trace of it could be found anywhere. Its disappearance was most complete.

At such times as the sun hid itself behind the disc of the earth there was darkness, though not for a long period.

This, however, was night, and as usual the voyagers slept. On a certain night Barney had an experience which he did not soon forget.

It was his watch and he was in the pilot house. The electric lights gleamed everywhere, except in the main cabin off the state-rooms.

Barney was drowsily keeping a lookout ahead of the air ship, when suddenly a sound came to his ears from the cabin.

He started up and looked in that direction. He saw a dark figure plainly cross the cabin and stand a moment by the table.

The light was dim, and Barney for a moment fancied that it might be Frank or the professor.

But a closer look convinced him that it was not. Instantly a strange terror seized him.

Despite this he knew his duty and obeyed it. He crept silently toward the cabin door.

But the dark figure glided into the passageway beyond, and was lost to view.

Barney turned to the right and glanced into the state-rooms. Frank and the professor were sleeping in their respective bunks.

With a cold sweat on his person, Barney passed on into Pomp's room. The coon swung in his hammock in deep sleep.

Barney placed a hand on his face and aroused him.

As the coon sprung up, he exclaimed:

"Fo' de lan's sake, Iish, wha' am de mattah? Yo' am drefful skeered about snuffin'. Wha' makes yo' shake so drefful bad?"

"Mither presarve us!" groaned the Celt. "It's a warnin' I've had."

"A warnin', sah?" exclaimed Pomp.

"Shure enough, au' it's not long I am fer this worruld now!"

With this Barney shiveringly told of the apparition. Pomp listened with crawling veins.

"Massy Lordy!" he gasped; "dat am a drefful sing. Am yo' suah it was a ghostis?"

"As shure as iver I kin be."

Strangely enough neither of them mentioned the affair to Frank. But they were satisfied completely that the air ship was haunted.

They did not tell Frank, for they feared that he might ridicule their fears. So the incident passed.

But others followed.

Pomp, the next morning, found evidences of a visit to his pantry.

Certain toothsome edibles were missing, and crumbs were on the floor.

This excited a query in the coon's mind. Were ghosts addicted to the use of food?

He did not attempt to answer the problem. Yet he said nothing. A revelation soon came, however.

Frank Reade, Jr., one day had occasion to go into the forward hold. There were heaps of bundles and piles of boxes which contained supplies. To his astonishment he saw that some of these were open.

"Those rascals, Barney and Pomp, have been holding secret banquets here," he muttered. "I'll take them in hand for that!"

So he called sternly for Barney, who came rushing down into the hold.

"Phwat will yez have, Misher Frank?" asked the Celt.

"An explanation," replied Frank. "What does this mean?"

He pointed to the open boxes and bundles. The Celt stared at them and turned ghastly white.

"Well?" asked Frank, sternly, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"Shure, sor, I—I hardly know, sor! I can't tell, sor!"

"Rascal!" said Frank, angrily. "Do you dare to deny that this is your work?"

"Be all the saints, sor, I niver did that!" cried the Celt, earnestly.

"Divil a bit, sor! I'll give me word on the Bible, sor!"

Frank looked keenly at the Celt. Something in his manner and voice half assured the young inventor that he was telling the truth.

There might be a mistake, and yet what could it be? Who else could have committed this depredation?

"Send Pomp to me," said Frank, sternly. "He will confess."

But at that moment the coon also appeared. He stared at the boxes until the whites of his eyes glistened.

"Fo' de lan's sake, Marse Frank!" he cried. "I never had nuffin' to do wif dis sing at all!"

"I believe you are a precious pair of falsifiers!" declared Frank. "Who else could have done it?"

Barney hesitated and looked at Pomp. The two stammered and then said nothing.

"Well, well," said Frank, "if you know, why don't you say so?"

"If yez plaze, sor," began Barney.

"De troof am, sah—" stammered Pomp.

"Speak!"

"So far as we know, sah, de ghostises did it," blurted forth Pomp, vigorously wiping perspiration from his forehead.

Frank stood statue-like.

"The what?" he roared.

Barney and Pomp began to tremble violently and look about fearfully. This mystified Frank all the more.

"Ghosts!" whispered Pomp.

"Ghosts!" exclaimed Frank. "What on earth has come over you rascals? Do you think I shall believe any such a thing as that?"

"Shure, sor, it's the truth!" declared Barney, "for I've seen them wid me own eyes!"

"You have seen them?"

"Yis, sor!"

So earnest and so apparently sincere were the two jokers that Frank was at once impressed.

"Where did you see a ghost?" he asked, more seriously. "And are you quite sure of your eyesight, Barney?"

"Shure, sor, I am!"

Then Barney told of the strange figure he had seen in the cabin. Pomp told of the strange things which had happened in the galley.

At this moment Professor Dunderberry came in. He heard the story also and said:

"That is very curious. I did not know that any of us were somnambulists."

"Nor are we," said Frank, with sudden inspiration. "I believe I have a solution of the mystery."

"What is it?"

Frank lowered his voice and said:

"There are more than four passengers aboard this air ship."

Dunderberry looked astonished.

"Where is the fifth?" he asked.

"Somewhere in this hold in hiding," replied Frank, positively.

"A stowaway!"

"Just so!"

For a moment all were too much amazed to speak. Then Frank said:

"He doubtless secreted himself here before the air ship left Readestown. Of course he would get hungry, and he has as a result opened these boxes to get food!"

"Quite correct!" cried Dunderberry. "And now what is in order?"

"We must find him!"

The search began at once.

Barney and Pomp took one side of the hold and Frank and Dean the other. But they had overturned but few boxes when a sepulchral voice said:

"I will surrender, friends. I am here in the interests of science only. Believe me that it was my only way to gain desired ends!"

Then a short squat figure came from the depths of the hold. He was dressed in a black garment. A glance was sufficient for Frank Reade, Jr.

It was Rinaldo Ray.

The spiritualistic crank and mind reader it was beyond all doubt. He appeared abject and battered enough.

"You!" exclaimed Frank, angrily. "Did I not refuse you passage on this trip?"

"True enough, sir."

"What do you mean, then, by this intrusion? This miserable trespass?"

Rinaldo Ray bowed low.

"The method was not honorable," he admitted, "but I believe the end attainable warranted it. I was desperate, and took my only recourse."

"You are a scoundrel!" cried Frank, angrily.

Ray smiled meekly.

"An impostor, a wretch! I've a mind to throw you over the rail!"

Ray bowed low.

"In that event," he said, "you would only save me the ultimate trouble of a transportation from Earth to Paradise."

"What do you mean?"

"That we are in Paradise now."

Dunderberry drew a prolonged whistle. He winked at Frank.

"You are a believer in Theosophy?" he asked of Ray.

"I am! It is the greatest and most profound science on earth."

"Ah, is that true? Then you believe that this space about us is the true Paradise to which the soul reverts after death?"

"I do!"

"Why do we not see any of its wonders?"

"We are not permitted that. The eyesight of man is limited. If it were not for this fact, every man would become a suicide."

"Truly you are a philosopher. How do you know that this is Paradise? Can you communicate with any of its dwellers?"

"Certainly! I have held many conversations with them in the spirit language. They have even materialized to me."

Dean drew a deep breath.

"Then you claim that we are at this moment surrounded by spirits?"

"There are some aboard this air ship, there are legions outside it!"

"Can you see them?"

"At times. If you were to die at this moment you would be able at once to see and know them."

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CRANK'S THEORY.

DEAN turned at once and made a sign to Frank.

"A confirmed maniac," he said, in a whisper. "He is a most dangerous type of crank!"

"So I thought," declared Frank; "but what shall we do with him? We cannot send him back to the earth. He is now a passenger with us."

"True. The best thing we can do, of course, is not to cross him. Pretend to believe in his theories, and then trust to chance for an opportunity to get rid of him!"

"That will not happen, unless by some miracle we get back to the earth."

"Well, we will do the best we can."

"So we will!"

So Frank and Dean proceeded to assure Ray that he was for the time accepted as a passenger. That at the first opportunity, however, he must be prepared to depart.

"Have no fear," he said, lightly. "I have gained my point and established my ends. I am anxious now to get back to the earth."

"So are all of us!"

"Is there no way provided?"

"None whatever, unless you can enlist a gang of your spirit friends to pull the air ship down into terrestrial atmosphere."

Ray looked offended.

"You make light of that which you do not understand," he said, with dignity. "I am entitled to respect."

"I beg your pardon," said the professor, and turned away.

All now returned to the upper cabin. Ray now proceeded to make himself at home.

He was interested in Dean's computations, both astronomical and

meteorological. He seemed fairly well versed in such matters himself.

But his one thought now seemed to be of the earth.

"There will be a Theosophical meeting of the world's members in Paris in December," he said. "I must be there and speak on this marvelous trip and the great truths I have learned."

"Perhaps you can suggest a way to get there?" asked Dunderberry, with a trace of sarcasm.

"I think I can!" said Ray, confidently.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the astronomer, in astonishment. "Pray what is your plan?"

"You are an astronomer," said Ray, coolly, "but you are not a mechanician. You cannot devise mechanical things. I am a Theosophist, but yet I am a master of the art of mechanics!"

"Very good!" admitted Dean. "I am curious to know your plan."

"Have you fire-arms aboard?"

"Yes!"

"Then you have powder?"

"Certainly!"

"Well," said Ray, decisively, "the point is half made. We are in utter space, are we not?"

"Yes!"

"And there is no such thing as navigating or governing the air ship in this vast element, or rather lack of element."

"It is impossible."

"The rotascopes won't work, nor the propeller either."

"Neither."

"Now, were you aware that a detonation or explosion in space has a far reaching effect. In fact that it acts as a buffer, and is the only method of propulsion which can be employed? Furthermore, the explosion need be only of the lightest kind."

A great light burst in upon the professor. He saw the other's point in a flash. For a moment he was startled.

Then he cried wildly:

"By Jupiter! You have keen wit, sir! You have hit upon a great scheme!"

Then he shouted wildly for Frank. The young inventor came rushing in.

The matter was explained to him, and Frank tore his hair metaphorically.

"Why, the simplest of things," he said. "It may enable us to at least get out of our present orbit. Another orbit might carry us even to the earth. Ray, you have done us a great service."

But the Theosophist gravely pointed out into space, saying:

"Give the credit there. They are the ones who gave the idea to me."

"The spirits?"

"Yes."

Rinaldo spoke with the deepest of sincerity. His face was open and his gaze earnest.

Frank and Dean were puzzled.

"Well," exclaimed the young inventor, later, "if that fellow is a madman, he is unlike any other I ever saw."

"You are right!" cried Dean, "and I am half tempted to believe that he is a greater genius than you or I. See how quickly he reasoned out the effect of an explosion in vacuum. Why, the lightest kind of a detonation will create such waves of concussion that we will be swept in an opposite direction for many miles."

"Then I suggest," said Frank, "that we get to work."

"What is your plan?"

"I shall put Barney and Pomp, with rifles heavily charged with powder, on the opposite side of the air ship. By their constant firing we ought to be driven toward the earth. The progress will be slow, it is true, but eventually we may reach the terrestrial atmosphere if—"

"What?"

"The powder holds out."

"Will it, think you?"

"I know no reason, for we have a great plenty of it. Again, as I say, we may get into a new orbit which will gravitate us toward the earth."

The spirit's of all rose.

No time was lost in trying the new method of propulsion. The rifles fired into space made a curious detonation very much as if fired under water.

But it was an unquestionable fact that the air ship receded from the concussion. A single shot caused it to drift for miles.

In this manner its orbit was changed. Though it was traveling on into space all the while, it was constantly drawing nearer the earth.

Day after day the earth's disc grew larger and plainer.

There seemed no doubt of the ultimate success of the plan. But a new barrier presented itself.

The stock of powder was already half exhausted. Yet the earth was far, far away.

Would there be enough to accomplish the remainder of the distance? It would be a certain pity, if, when the air ship was almost within the line of terrestrial atmosphere, the powder should completely fail them.

But the voyagers clung to hope.

And thus day by day the air ship drew nearer its own desired element. But when success seemed assured, a catastrophe put it far out of reach.

Barney was using the rifles as directed one morning, when suddenly

he caught sight of a distant ball of fire. It seemed far above them and in the field of the Milky Way.

At first he thought of an aerolite and then of a comet.

It was rushing along with frightful force. The voyagers now were all able to view it.

That it would not strike the air ship was certain. All fears were easy on that score.

And a few hours later it went flashing by overhead on its terrific orbit. It vanished right into the midst of the Milky Way.

"On the earth," said Dunderberry, "that will be called a shooting star. As a matter of fact it is a falling asteroid. It is lucky for us that we are not in its way!"

But an hour later all became conscious of an astounding and demoralizing fact. The earth was again receding from them.

Some stronger force was drawing them toward the Milky Way. At this rate they seemed certain to reach it.

For a time they were at a loss to account for this distressing phenomenon, but finally Professor Dunderberry hit upon the solution.

"That falling asteroid is accountable for it," he declared. "It made a tremendous commotion in space, and we are feeling it in the shape of a current of attraction."

"We must overcome it," said Frank.

"Impossible!"

"Why?"

"We have not the power. Powder will not do it. We shall speed on toward the Milky Way until some new commotion in space sets us going in another direction."

"Then we are practically at the mercy of every commotion of the sort?"

"The next aerolite may drag us several thousand miles in another direction?"

"Just so. Perhaps some day, if chance dictates, we may be drawn back into the earth's atmosphere!"

"Or in course of years drawn nearer the great planets, and perhaps fall on one of them."

"That is it!"

"We are then like a pith ball upon an electric disc. Wholly at the mercy of quickly created currents, if such these agitations can be called."

"You have it!"

It was out of the question now to think of resorting to the powder again as a means of reaching the earth. There was not enough of it left.

And it was deemed better to save it, in case of emergency. Meanwhile, the air ship was traveling rapidly across the face of the Milky Way.

For days it kept on, until the earth seemed quite small comparatively, and all knew that it was a mighty distance away.

But gradually the attractive power held the air ship less and less in its grip. Finally, it ceased altogether and the ship remained almost stationary.

Then a sudden, startling idea came to Frank.

He sprang up.

"On my word," he cried, "there is one thing which I had forgotten altogether. It may prove our salvation."

"Ah," asked Rinaldo Ray, "what may that be, Mr. Reade?"

"The electric attractomotor!"

Frank was angry with himself for not having thought of this before. Although he was not sure of its successful working, he was bound to try it.

It did not take long to procure it from the air ship's hold. Then with great care it was fastened to one of the windows of the pilot house.

The sash was then drawn, and the disc heavily charged. It was not long before all experienced the sensation that the air ship was moving.

Somewhere beyond the region of space the attractomotor had formed an answering magnet. That it was drawing the air ship onward was certain.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### SICKNESS COMES.

For a brief spell hope was revived in the breasts of the voyagers. It began to look not only possible but certain that the attractomotor would work out their salvation.

But as all eyes were turned toward the earth a sudden painful fact became apparent.

It was receding from them instead of their approaching it. This was by no means a pleasant realization.

Then it was perceived that the attractomotor had found its magnetic affinity in some other planet or heavenly body. As near as Frank could reckon they were being drawn with frightful speed toward the sun.

This would never do.

It was impossible to tell how fast they were traveling. But between them and the sun there were mighty fields of meteorites.

Any one of these would be sufficient to wreck the air ship. It would never do to enter among them.

The attractomotor would at this rate speedily work out their ruin. Frank instantly turned off the current.

"Whew!" he ejaculated, "that will never do! We would go to destruction!"

"Worse and worse!" cried Dean, wringing his hands. "Our chances are growing small, Frank!"

"That they are," said the young inventor, gloomily. "Why could not the attractomotor have made affinity with the earth?"

"Fate is against us."

Rinaldo Ray was noncommittal. He would say nothing.

"Perhaps," said Dean, after some thought, "time may change our position so that we will strike affinity with the earth."

Frank's face brightened.

"If we had only tried it a while ago when we were so near the earth."

"Too bad!"

"We might be in terrestrial atmosphere now."

"You are right. Yet, as I say, a change of our position may yet give us the opportunity. I would advise keeping the attractomotor in position and trying it from time to time."

"I will do so."

Some strange phenomenons were now witnessed in the sky above, especially in the regions of the Milky Way.

The sun's rays, shining through the nebulous matter, made prismatic hues more beautiful than any rainbow. Strange shapes and forms were produced.

At times it seemed as if forests of pearl, seas of gold and silver with rocky shores, and even a shadowy city of gold, appeared.

It was a wonderful phantasmagorical display, and had not the voyages been men of learning and comprehension their superstitions would surely have been aroused.

Since coming into space not one had ventured out on deck. To have attempted such a thing would have been certain death.

For space holds no life-giving element. It is as much a vacuum as if one were beneath the bell of an air pump.

To breathe for even a moment would have been utterly impossible, yet Frank proposed thefeat.

"I should like to step out on deck," he said, "though its chief peril will be the possibility of being carried over the rail into an orbit of one's own, being so much lighter a body than the air ship."

"How will you go to work to accomplish so hazardous afeat?" asked Dean.

"Easily. I have generators and helmets which I use as diving suits when under water. The oxygen generator, being fastened on the back, makes a circulation in the helmet on the same principle that we get our air in this cabin."

"Why, that is quite practicable," cried the professor. "Truly, Frank, you're a man of wonderful resource."

"A genius!" said Rinaldo Ray.

The diving helmets were brought up from the hold. Then Frank donned one, followed by the professor and Ray.

The young inventor insisted that a rope should be carried from the waist or belt of one to the other, and that this should be fastened to the air ship's door, for Frank knew well that once they got off the air ship's deck into space their fate would be sealed, for the chance of getting back would be very slight.

Thus equipped they went out on deck. They stood now literally in space. The sensation was a peculiar one.

They could feel with all the more certainty that they were continually falling through space. Yet so immense was the distance that they might fall at the present rate for years in various directions and yet never lose sight of the earth.

It was a strange realization.

The voyagers remained on deck for awhile. The professor made some meteorological notes and then they crawled back into the cabin.

Not much account had been made of the lapse of time. It had seemed scarcely a week since they left Readestown.

But one day when Pomp mentioned the fact that a certain line of provisions had become exhausted, the truth was evolved that they had been two months in space.

And the earth was further away than ever.

Another month drifted by. It seemed hardly a day.

Then Frank went down and examined the stores.

He was startled to find that at least a third of these had spoiled, owing to some strange electrical effect. Such as were left were not of excellent quality.

It became necessary to at once cut down rations.

But added to this startling possibility of starvation, another danger began to threaten.

Owing possibly to the conditions of life in the artificial atmosphere, or perhaps meteorological or chemical influences surrounding them—something—it was not known what, began to prey upon the vitality of the voyagers.

All grew weak and pallid. The flesh assumed a strange flabbiness. The eyes became lack-lustre and weak, and a strange sickness was felt.

For a time the alarm was great, for it was by no means certain but that this would prove fatal.

Frank had medicines and no little medical skill.

But none of these seemed to hit the case. The disease seemed somewhat akin to scurvy, yet the treatment for that disease seemed ineffectual.

The outlook now became most serious. In face of any other contingency, the courage of the voyagers might have held out.

But sickness, with the possibility of death, was a foe which was terrible indeed to meet.

Finally Ray was taken down very sick. He raved incoherently, and was in dreadful pain.

In lucid moments he made strange statements.

"I tell you it is written," he said, impressively. "My spirit friends have told me all. We can never hope to return to the earth. We must leave our bodies forever in space."

"But," he concluded, "it is only a brief transition. We pass out of that door in the spirit, leaving our flesh behind us. Then we are at once in Paradise."

After some thought, he again declared:

"I shall be the first to pass out into the spirit world."

The situation was a most distressing one. The mania which afflicted Ray threatened to attack the others.

Barney and Pomp were in an almost useless condition, more from supernatural terrors than aught else.

Frank Reade, Jr., was the only one of the party who in any degree mastered the fearful spell.

He was ill, heart-sick and wretched, but he would not yield. An iron will kept him up.

But the fearful climax came one day. Rinaldo Ray was its central figure.

Frank was in the pilot house making observations. The professor was asleep in his state-room, and Barney and Pomp were working in the hold.

Suddenly Frank heard a strange cry. It was like the wild supplicating appeal of somebody in dreadful agony.

He started up, thinking of Ray at once. He was sure in that moment that the Theosophist was dying.

But before he could reach the door, he heard the deck door open and shut. Horrified he rushed to the window.

The scene which he beheld was a terrible one. There was the Theosophist running along the deck, with nothing on but his sleeping garments.

"Help!" shouted Frank. "Barney—Pomp! Bring the diving suits. We must get him back before death can seize him."

Barney and Pomp came tumbling up out of the hold.

Professor Dean also tumbled out of his bunk and appeared on the scene.

But all were only in time to witness the awful fate of Rinaldo Ray. The maniac made a convulsive leap over the rail, shot back of the air ship a dozen yards and there remained.

But he was plainly as dead as dead could be.

His attenuated form was stiff and set, and his vacant eyes wide open, glaring at the air ship. It was a horrible spectacle.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Dean, "that is too horrible!"

Gradually the air ship, being a heavier body, left the dead man behind.

To recover his body would have been impossible, even had it been desirable. Rinaldo Ray was beyond all human aid.

And his body would continue to float on through space until such time as decomposition would dissolve it into ashes. It was the end of the Theosophist.

Whether his spirit was at that moment hovering over the air ship could be only a matter of conjecture. The Theosophist and his theories were gone.

None of the voyagers had the hardihood to look back again to where that hideous corpse was following the air ship for several days.

Then it was seen that they had left it far behind. This was a great relief.

Days passed and the store of provisions began to grow lower. Truly, the future held a serious outlook.

Even Frank Reade, Jr., had almost begun to abandon hope.

Day after day the air ship still drifted in space. Was she to become the floating tomb of the voyagers?

## CHAPTER IX.

### EARTHWARD BOUND.

But there is an end to all things. It was not ordained by fate that the Shooting Star was to forever continue her comet-like course through endless space.

One day it occurred to Frank to try the attractomotor again.

He turned on the current and awaited results. Several hours passed. Then a great cry escaped him.

"Dean," he shouted, "come here!"

The professor rushed to the pilot house.

"Well?"

"Look at the earth!"

The scientist did so. He gave a yearning, half incredulous cry.

"Is it true?" he exclaimed. "or is it an optical delusion? Are we really nearing the earth?"

"As I live I believe it," said Frank, feverishly. "Certainly the disc is larger and plainer."

"So it seems to me. But it seems too good to be true!"

"We will hope."

"Aye!"

Then both men sank down by the pilot house window and watched the distant disc of the earth.

Soon a great white blur hid a part of it.

"Clouds!" exclaimed Frank. "It has been long since we have seen those. We are drawing nearer at a fearful rate."

"Heaven be praised!"

"Amen!"

Hour after hour they sat there. When night came they slept in that same position. There was no thought of food.

And when daylight came again a surprising spectacle was revealed. The great disc of the earth seemed to overshadow all else, and even the stars were hardly visible.

There was no longer any doubt. The air ship's course had changed—perhaps owing to the attractomotor—and she was falling straight toward the earth.

At once the state of affairs aboard the air ship underwent a great metamorphosis. The spirits of the voyagers arose.

They seemed to forget their illness and were wholly engrossed in the delightful prospect before them.

They were returning to the earth. Home and friends, life and all that was dear to them seemed once more within grasp.

Barney stood on his head and Pomp danced a jig. Even the professor hummed a song.

The nearer they drew to the earth the more rapid seemed their progress.

They were shooting out of space just as an aerolite does. In due course they would plunge into the atmosphere.

On and on they sped.

Frank thus far had laid all to the good work of the attractomotor. But now a new and startling reason was discovered.

At a distant point at right angles with the air ship a great glaring light was seen.

At once it was recognized as an aerolite. That it was falling toward the earth was apparent.

Its course was oblique to that of the air ship, which it was approaching at furious speed. For a moment all were alarmed.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Frank. "I believe that we are in its course and that it will strike us!"

"That looks to be true," agreed the professor. "She is certainly coming this way at fearful speed."

The spectacle was a sublime as well as terrifying one.

On swept the meteor until it flashed past some miles above the air ship. Then it receded with a rumble-like thunder as it plunged into the earth's atmosphere.

The air ship spun about like a top, until all on board were dizzy and nigh blind. Once it seemed a certainty that the air ship was doomed.

There came a terrific crash which seemed to rend the ship from stem to stern.

Then it rocked violently and became quiet once more. After the meteor had passed, Dean asked:

"What on earth struck us? Was it the concussion?"

"Bejabers, I was sure the air ship was going to pieces!" cried Barney.

"No," said Frank, seriously. "I fear that we have been struck by a fragment of the aerolite. Oh—shut the after-cabin door, Barney—quick, or we suffocate."

Barney acted just in time. All the artificial air in the cabin was giving way to space. The after part of the air ship was open in some part, as this proved.

An explanation was quickly gained.

From the upper observation tower the extent of the damage done the Star by the fragment which had struck it, was easily seen.

It had plunged straight through the air ship's hull.

What was worse, in this part of the hull were the dynamos. If it had struck those, beyond doubt they were demolished.

In that event the situation was a terrible one.

With the dynamos destroyed the air ship could not be sailed, as neither the rotoscope nor the propeller would act.

Frank sprung into the pilot house. He touched one of the electric buttons which connected with the electric engine. The rotoscopes should at once have begun to revolve.

But they did not.

The truth was plain.

The dynamos were wrecked, and the Shooting Star was like a dismantled ship in space. It was a most terrible realization.

What was more, the Star was shooting down toward the earth and would soon plunge into the atmosphere. In that event, without some resisting force the voyagers would fall upon the earth at frightful speed and be crushed to a jelly.

This was the thought in Dean's mind.

"My God!" he gasped. "We are all dead men! There is no help for us! We have only escaped from a fearful death by starvation in space to return to the earth, it is true, but to meet a worse death when we get there!"

Frank made no reply.

"Is there no way to repair the dynamos?" asked Dean, desperately. Frank shook his head.

"None!" he said.

"Then we are doomed?"

"Not necessarily!"

"What? Will it not be death for us to fall full force a distance of a dozen miles or more through the atmosphere, with all the speed of gravitation?"

"It would be. But we shall not fall at such speed!"

"What do you mean?"

"I have provided for just such a contingency as this!" said Frank. "By touching this spring the wings of a parachute will fly out from the ship's sides and she will sink gradually and safely!"

Dean's face cleared.

"Thank God!" he cried; "then we have hope once more!"

"But there is a danger which you have not considered."

"What?"

"We shall fall upon the earth, to be sure. But in what kind of a spot shall we alight? Without the aid of the roascopes we cannot be the choosers. There is the possibility of falling into a lake, or an ocean, or for that matter into the hands of some savage tribe in the midst of a wilderness or desert. The chances are slight that we shall alight near Readestown."

"Very true," agreed Dean. "I had not thought of that. Not a pleasant contemplation. But we can find means to float if we fall in water."

"Yes."

"Or if among savages we can make a desperate fight. We have fire-arms aboard."

"Of course we shall do the best we can."

Every moment now they were drawing nearer the earth. Suddenly the blue mist began to dispel, and the outlines of land and sea were seen.

Then mountains and water became plain. Frank pressed the spring which set the parachute wings out. Then the descent was made slower.

The motion of the air ship in the atmosphere was now plainly felt. Through a belt of clouds the Shooting Star sank, and then a mighty and most delightful panorama was spread before the voyagers.

The dear old earth was but a few miles below. Its mountains and valleys, its lakes and rivers showed very plainly.

Instantly Professor Dean knelt and prayed. Barney crossed himself and Pomp fell upon his face. Frank removed his hat and looked devoutly aloft to that very region of space from whose terrors they had just been delivered.

The parachute wings on the air ship's sides were the salvation of the voyagers.

Down slowly settled the air ship. Soon objects below became quite plain.

Only a mile was left to traverse. Frank and Dean were busy studying the country.

They saw below them a great range of mountains.

Eastward were mighty floor-like plains. Westward were foothills and a mighty depression.

All was a mighty wilderness. There was no sign of civilization. The professor exclaimed:

"We are falling upon the American continent, Frank."

"Yes."

"I should say these were a part of the Rockies."

"As true as you live!" replied the young inventor. "See those deep canyons! Note the broad mesa—the cacti and the palms! On my word, I believe this is the region of middle Arizona."

"Apache land!"

"Yes."

The two voyagers exchanged glances. Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you see any sign of human habitation—at least, of civilization?"

"Not the least."

"Then the worst has come to us. We shall fall into that little pocket among the hills down there, and perhaps right into a nest of Apaches. It is a certain fact that they infest all the mountain region of Arizona."

"In that event—"

"We may have dropped literally from the frying pan into the fire; but we will do our best."

## CHAPTER X.

### THE APACHES.

It was by no means a comforting reflection that the aerial voyagers had dropped from the clouds into a region infested with deadly perils. Dean knew well what it meant to skirmish with Apaches in their own land.

It would mean but one ultimate ending. The air ship could not certainly leave its resting place.

Then it would be only a matter of time when the besieged adventurers would fall victims either to starvation or the scalping knives of the fiends.

As Dean had said, there were plenty of fire-arms aboard, and the foe could be kept at bay.

But this would not effect the ultimate outcome, unless succor came from some other source.

What that source might be it was not easy to say. There were military outposts in Arizona, but none were in the vicinity so far as could be seen.

Down settled the air ship. In a very short time she was descending among the high peaks, and then it was seen just where she would alight.

When she touched the earth with a sudden jar, it was upon a heap of broken quartz, on a small mound in a pocket of the hills.

On all sides were frowning peaks and mountain walls. Passes led in various directions out of the pockets.

Vegetation was scarce. The floor of the pocket was sandy and ledgy. The region was desolate.

"Now," said Frank, "if the Apaches did not see us alight here, the chances are we may succeed in getting out of this pocket."

"But the chances," said Dean, "are one hundred to one that they have seen us, and are even now scurrying among the hills hereabouts!"

"They can easily surround us."

"Indeed, yes, and once surrounded we are done for, unless succor reaches us from outside."

As soon as the air ship rested firmly on the ground, it was the first impulse of the voyagers to get once more on terra firma.

They leaped down from the air ship's deck and were rewarded with a startling surprise; not one but fell in a heap.

Not one could stand any length of time on his feet. Fearful giddiness was the cause.

They had been so long in space, gyrating and whirling in all directions for months, that all sense of equilibrium was temporarily lost.

That it would return in a short while, of course, was a certainty.

So they rolled about on the ground and tried to overcome the deadly faintness of the effort to regain a perpendicular position. It was fully an hour before Frank was able to maintain a tottering walk.

Such a thing as exploration of the pocket that day was out of the question.

Moreover, all were weak yet from the dreadful aerial sickness. So they crawled back aboard the air ship.

Pomp prepared a hearty meal of which all partook. A few hours' sleep and all felt better.

Nightfall, however, was at hand. Nothing could be done, therefore, about a change of base until the next day.

But when nightfall shut down they crawled out on deck to enjoy the balmy air. Frank opened a box of fragrant cigars, bat Dean said:

"Put them away!"

"Why?"

"It would be dangerous. Apache nostrils are very keen, and they would catch the odor a long ways off!"

"You are right!"

The darkness was intense. The night air was still, save for the occasional howl of a wolf or call of a night bird.

But they had not sat long when Dean gripped Frank's sleeve and said:

"Look out yonder!"

The young inventor complied. On the summit of a distant peak, outlined against the sky, he saw a bright red star of light.

"Now look over there!" said the professor, pointing to another peak.

Another bright star of light was seen. Frank looked at them closely.

"They are signal fires," declared the scientist. "You may be sure that we are in the center of a cordon of Apaches."

"Ugh!" said Frank; "that is unfortunate!"

"Yes."

"We ought to have moved out of here immediately upon alighting."

"That was impossible."

"Which was our misfortune. There is little hope for us now. We might as well have remained in space as did poor Rinaldo Ray."

"That is true," agreed Dean. "And it is my opinion that we are exposing ourselves out here. We might expect an attack at any time."

"You are right."

The words had barely left Frank's lips when something clicked against the steel wall of the cabin by his head and fell into his lap.

He picked it up and exclaimed:

"By Jove! An Indian arrow!"

"Enough!" exclaimed Dean, springing up. "Into the cabin everybody, or it will be the end of us!"

Barney and Pomp darted into the pilot house. The strongest light available now was a large reflector, as the destruction of the dynamos ruined the connections of the search-light.

This reflector could throw a light but a few yards ahead of the air ship. Beyond all was intense darkness.

Of course this was largely in the Apaches' favor. It enabled them to creep up unobserved.

And but for the inadvertent arrow they might have got near enough to have picked off the whole party of voyagers at one well aimed volley.

As it was, they narrowly escaped several bullets and arrows on the way into the cabin.

The cabin doors and windows were quickly closed and barred. Loopholes were opened, and the voyagers took their stations with repeating Winchesters.

In the pilot house Frank waited with several loaded Winchesters by his side. Professor Dean was in the after cabin.

Barney and Pomp were on either side. Thus the foe could approach in no direction without the certainty of a shot.

Each defender had at least two sixteen-shot Winchesters. This meant thirty-two rapidly fired bullets, which ought to stop quite a large body of men, being almost equal to a gatling.

But the enemy did not at once show themselves.

The Apache is a cunning devil, and seldom exposes his pudgy frame to the aim of the white man's deadly rifle. It is his forte to fight in the bush.

Such a thing as a charge is seldom known, unless the odds be absolutely overwhelming.

Even then one white man with a rifle, lying behind a dead horse on an open plain, has been known to hold half a hundred of them at bay for hours.

Should they advance in a body they would be sure of vanquishing the foe, but one or more of their number would be killed. It was individual fear which kept them back in such cowardly fashion.

But once the foe is crippled or disarmed, then the Apache nature shows itself.

No torture is too fiendish for the miserable captive—no death too harsh.

So every Apache creeping upon the air ship was counting the chances for his life.

Each knew that determined white men were on board that strange craft. Each knew that the death-dealing rifles might single him out.

Such has ever been the bad fault of Indian warfare. A lack of concert of action and collective courage.

But they squirmed up to within gunshot of the air ship and opened a desultory fire.

Bullets rattled against the cabin wall. The defenders could only return the fire at random.

"If only the dogs wud just show thmselves," cried Barney. "Shure, I'd made some av them sick!"

"Golly! so would I," averred Pomp.

"That is not their game!" said Dean. "They always want to win their victories without cost."

"That we cannot permit!" said Frank.

"By no means!"

So the desultory fire was kept up for hours. But the Apaches did not venture an attack.

Thus the night went on. After a time the Indian fire ceased. It seemed as if they had abandoned the conflict.

When dawn came not one of them was in sight. It was hard to realize that a skirmish had just been taking place there.

"Well," said Barney, with bravado, "we give them such a hot reception that they give up the thryin' to overpower us."

"They were only feeling of us," said Dean. "We must be more on the alert than ever. There was less danger of an attack last night than there will be again."

The boiling Arizona sun was over the glinting peaks. The air was intensely sultry.

But in the pocket a certain welcome coolness reigned. Not an Apache was in sight.

Frank had thought of a reconnoitering trip, but Dean said, earnestly:

"For the love of Heaven do not go outside to-day. I'll wager a man could not get ten feet from the air ship without being transfixed by an arrow."

"Where are the fiends?" asked Frank, in amazement.

"They are hiding behind every available crag and spur of rock hereabouts," said Dean. "I remember the warning an old trapper once gave me."

"When you strike into the Arizona hills and see no Apaches," he said, "you may be sure that they are all about you. They have the stillest faculty of making themselves invisible of any savages on earth."

"Then I see no help for us but to remain right here!"

"It is our only chance!"

"But for how long?"

"Until they make up their minds to attack or until succor shall come."

"Is either chance good?"

"Not in the immediate future. The Apaches are patient. Rather than lose a life they will watch us for a hundred years!"

"Confound them!" said Frank, angrily. "I wish I had my electric gun here. I'd soon scatter them."

"I don't doubt it. What a pity that we have not the gun!"

"Indeed it is. If they would only show themselves there would be some satisfaction in fighting them."

But the day began to drift by and the patience of the besieged was becoming exhausted when an unlooked for incident happened.

## CHAPTER XI.

### BESIEGED.

SUDDENLY from behind one of the boulders a savage stepped into view. He carried in his hand a flag which might once have been white. Frank recognized the truce at once, and commanded Barney and Pomp not to fire.

Thus reassured, the Indian envoy came rapidly forward.

He was a short, squat savage, after the manner of the Apache, with exceedingly broad shoulders and deep chest on very slender legs. He was dressed in buckskin and wore a Navajo blanket.

He approached the air ship until within easy speaking distance. Then Frank stepped out on the forward deck.

"Pale face speak," said the Indian, in a guttural tone.

"Well, my red brother," said Frank, "what can I do for you?"

"Black Wolf, he big chief. Own all dis country. White man no right come here!"

"Are you Black Wolf?" asked Frank.

The Apache inclined his head.

"Then, my red brother," said Frank, "I want to assure you that we are not here of our own free will, and if you will agree not to molest us, we will take our way out of your country just as quickly as we can!"

The savage's beady eyes glittered.

"This Apache land," he declared. "White man no right here. Do heap damage. Must pay Apache!"

"Well?" asked Frank. "How much pay do you want?"

"White man lay down guns. Gib to red man all he hab. Mebbe Apache let him go free!"

"What assurance shall we have that you will let us go free?" asked Frank. "Only your word?"

"White man surrender. No tell now!"

"Bumph!" muttered Frank, "that is a poor game, Mr. Indian. Perhaps you think we are fools. No unconditional surrender to you?"

"That is right" said the professor. "Do not trust them or you will be sorry. Once we are in their clutches they will forget their word and torture us. You cannot trust an Apache!"

Frank raised his voice.

"Listen, red man!" he said. "These are our terms. You can accept them or not as you choose."

"We will leave our air ship behind with many rich and valuable effects. You are to leave this vicinity until we are gone. When we are once out of these hills we will trouble you no more, and you can have what we leave here. We will take nothing but our guns and a few personal effects!"

There was a moment of silence. The stolid expression of the Apache's face never changed.

"White men our prisoners," he said. "Must surrender!"

"Listen!" said Frank, angrily. "It will cost you much powder and many of your braves to take us. We are well armed and will fight to the death. You will then get only what we leave you now, and you will have paid a big price for it."

"Ugh!" retorted the savage. "Black Wolf has thousand men, fighting men, and he cut white men all to pieces. He has spoken. White man surrender or Black Wolf take his scalp!"

"You may as well get back to your fellows!" cried Frank, angrily. "We cannot treat with you for a certainty. Come and take us if you can!"

Black Wolf turned and strode away. Frank entered the cabin and the voyagers knew that it must be a struggle to the death.

The battle now began.

Bullets and arrows began to rattle down upon the air ship. Yet, of course, they could do no harm.

On the other hand the defenders accomplished much.

By keeping a continual sharp eye on the heights they occasionally succeeded in spotting a savage, and a rifle ball quickly cut his rascally career short.

Thus the conflict went on through the day.

In the meanwhile Frank had been at work on the dynamos. He succeeded in resurrecting one, a small one, intact, and he at once proceeded to connect it with the search-light.

The result was that it was made to yield quite a respectable light, which made all quite plain within a radius of several hundred yards.

This would be the greatest of safeguards against a night attack.

The spirits of the voyagers freshened and they entered upon the work of defense with fresh courage and interest.

There was a good chance of holding the savages at bay with good success for an indefinite period. Perhaps some chance of rescue might turn up.

Certainly this would be better than surrendering to the Apaches, who beyond doubt would torture the prisoners to death.

"Better death in strong self-defense," said Dean. "I know these Apaches. You cannot trust them."

After the return of Black Wolf to his companions there was rather a savage attack with bullets and arrows.

Then the attack died down and finally ceased. For several hours not a shot was heard nor a savage seen.

But this was entirely characteristic of the Apache. Silence with them boded trouble and by no means any intention of giving up the game.

The Apaches would never do this until their numbers were so reduced that necessity compelled it. Of this our adventurers were assured.

With something of curiosity, they waited to see what the next move of the wretches would be.

Time passed and the day waned. It then seemed an assured fact that they intended to wait for darkness.

"We may look for some sort of a sharp game to-night," said Dean.

"Be well prepared."

After a time the Arizona sun settled rapidly in the western sky; darkness most intense followed.

Frank did not at once make use of the search-light.

He knew that the Apaches would not venture their attack until a late hour at night. He preferred to wait until he could spring the light upon them with deadly effect and advantage.

After the evening meal, prepared by Pomp, the defenders took their positions and kept the sharpest kind of a lookout.

The silence of the grave reigned in the pocket; not the least sign of the savages was visible or audible.

But of a sudden a bright flame of light leaped from a crag, and came whistling down upon the air ship. From all quarters others came.

They fell on the deck or on the ground about, and burned viciously for a time. They were blazing arrows.

The savages were trying an old method of destroying their foes, but it would not work.

The fire had no effect upon the steel surface of the air ship.

For fully an hour the arrows continued to fall, but they all died out without effect.

At length the attempt was abandoned. Silence once more reigned. It was now past midnight.

The adventurers kept now a closer watch than ever, for it was certain that the savages would try a new dodge. What it would be they could only guess.

But suddenly Dean, whose ears were very acute, whispered:

"On my word, Frank, I believe I can hear them!"

"Can you?"

"Yes!"

"In what direction?"

"Out yonder, or toward that southern end of the pocket. Listen?"

Frank did so, but not the slightest sound could be heard. However, Dean was positive.

"Enough!" said the young inventor. "We will soon find out!"

With this he stepped up to the search-light and turned it on full force. In an instant the pocket in that direction was made as light as day.

And simultaneously a great chorus of yells went up. Bullets began to fly. The scene was startling.

The floor of the pocket was covered with wriggling forms. The Apaches, as was their custom, were trying to approach the air ship by stealth.

"Give it to them!" cried Frank, as he seized his repeater.

A terrific volley followed. The effect was disastrous to the Apaches.

They did not attempt to make a stand. The blinding white light blinded them, and they fled before it in cowardly fashion.

But before they got out of range many an Apache lay dead on the ground. The aim of the defenders was deadly.

This settled the affair for that night. The Apaches did not return to attack.

The repulse had apparently convinced them that the air ship defenders could not be taken in any such a way.

Nor did any of them show up the next day.

Apparently they had left the pocket, not to return. But our friends were not to be deceived.

They kept just as keen a lookout. But Frank had been doing some tall thinking.

He called Dean to one side and said:

"I have a plan!"

"Ahl!" exclaimed the scientist. "What may it be?"

"I think if we can work it right we can give those rascals the slip!"

"Good!" said Dean. "I shall be glad to hear it."

"You know the nights are very dark."

"Yes."

"If you will look at the sky you will see that there is a good likelihood of a heavy storm between now and midnight."

"I had noted that."

"Very good," continued Frank. "Now suppose they renew their attack to-night; we will repulse them. After a repulse it is probable that they will concentrate their forces for the purpose of discussion."

"Well?"

"That is our time to act."

"What—"

"I mean that we must trust to the darkness, to stealth and to their confusion to boldly leave the air ship, and trust to making our way silently out through that southern pass. I think we can do it. Once out of the hills we must get into the open country, and we are likely to strike a fort or some military outpost."

"They will trail us."

"Then we must defend ourselves. We have our rifles and plenty of ammunition. It is our only chance to make our escape."

Dean was thoughtful; he knew that it was a bold and hazardous feat. But—nothing venture, nothing gain. He was not the one to hang back.

So after a while he said:

"If you say so we will try it."

"I think we can make it go. Mind you, circumstances are to govern our action."

"Yes."

"We can only attempt it after a repulse of the foe, while all is utter darkness and while their line will probably be broken. They will be lax at that time, if ever, and will not dream of our attempting a sally."

The more the plan was discussed the more feasible it looked. So it was definitely agreed upon.

All plans were carefully laid. To preclude the possibility of failure every precaution was taken.

Barney and Pomp were quite on the qui vive over the affair. To them it promised a desirable spice of adventure and risk.

But Frank and Dean were grave and serious, though courageous and alert, for they knew that their lives hung lightly in the balance.

## CHAPTER XII.

### WHICH ENDS THE TALE.

Of course they could remain aboard the air-ship and make a long battle of it. It was even possible that the Apaches might tire of the effort.

But the attempt at escape meant, if successful, immediate deliverance from an uncomfortable position without further loss of time.

The voyagers would rather accept the risk than to procrastinate with narrowing chances for escape every day.

So the day wore away without any sign of the foe.

Meanwhile in the northeast heavy clouds began piling up to the zenith. Long jagged streaks of lurid lightning ran across the sky.

The distant rumble of thunder was heard, and a soothng wind played among the peaks.

"Perhaps the storm may prevent an attack to-night," said Frank. But Dean shook his head.

"They will not fail to take advantage of it," he said. "I know the Apaches far too well. Be sure of that!"

Soon heavy drops of rain came splashing down. Then darkness closed in and the war of the elements began.

Until midnight the storm raged with great fury. All this while the defenders stood on their guard.

Dean's prediction was verified. The Apaches did not lose an opportunity to make an attack.

And this time somewhat singularly they came openly and savagely on a charge. This was an unusual thing.

So impetuous was the assault that, but for the assistance of the search-light and the deadly work of the repeaters, they might have been successful.

As it was, however, the fearful stinging volleys drove them back with frightful loss. Fully a dozen of their dead were carried away in the retreat.

The rain fell in torrents. It drenched the earth and made cataracts over the cliffs.

It aided rather than impeded the defenders. The Apaches on the other hand were soaked to the skin and unable to handle themselves as adroitly as usual.

So it turned out a hollow victory for the white men. They sent up a ringing cheer, and then Frank cried:

"Now, boys, now is our time!"

The savages had been driven back to the cover of the rocks. Frank held the search-light's glare upon the northern wall.

This left the entrance to the southern pass in darkness. Preparations were quickly made.

It was hardly likely that there would be sentries in the pass. The Apaches would surely never think of such a thing as an attempt at escape on the part of the besieged.

A few moments later four muffled and armed men slipped down over the air ship's rail, and each holding a short rope, that they might not become separated in the darkness, they set forth.

Slowly and steadily, with every sense on the alert, they crept forward.

They could only locate the entrance to the pass by guess work. On over the slippery ground they crept.

Down poured the fearful torrents of rain. Nothing could be seen a yard about.

It seemed an age before they finally reached the mouth of the pass. Frank, who was in advance, came into collision with the rocky corner. For a moment it stunned him.

But, feeling his way along the wall, he kept on.

It seemed as if they had crept a mile in the darkness, but in reality it was only a little more than a hundred yards down the pass, when a startling incident occurred.

In feeling his way along the rocky wall, Frank put his hand against something soft and warm.

A guttural exclamation followed.

Like a flash, Frank sprang away. It was an Apache—probably a sentry—cowering under the rocks.

The crisis for a moment unnerved the young inventor. A short, sharp exclamation came from the savage's lips. Then, without an answer, the fugitives plunged ahead at random into the gloom.

They ran, stumbled and fell they knew not how far.

But finally breathless and exhausted they came to a halt at a break in the pass. The rain had suddenly ceased its torrents for a brief spell.

"Whew!" gasped the professor, leaning against a rock. "I can't go any further just now, even if it costs me my life!"

"Same here!" declared Frank.

"Golly!" whispered Pomp. "I done fo't I felt dem Injins in mah hair!"

"Bejabers!" retorted Barney; "they wud be afther dullin' their knives on that, I'm thinkin'."

Pomp sputtered a reply, and a wordy warfare might have followed had not Frank put an end to it.

The voyagers crunched down here for awhile.

Every moment they expected to see the torches of a pursuing party, but they did not appear.

For some singular reason the Apache sentry did not give the alarm. On second thought this was not strange.

He doubtless did not recognize any of the party as white men, and had not the slightest suspicion of their identity as such.

If he had, no doubt he would have sent up the alarm. What his conclusions were, there was no means of knowing.

So after a while, much reassured, the fugitives went on down the pass. After a time the storm cleared.

The stars came out and the way was made quite clear.

Not an Apache was seen or heard anywhere. The truth was they were yet cowering up there in the rocks watching the air ship and yet not daring to attack it.

Before daylight the escaping party had made the wide plain below. They forded the broad but shallow river, and finally gained the cover of a lonely butte some seven miles from the base of the mountains.

Here they decided to remain until nightfall should come again, as to cross the open prairie in daylight would be too risky.

"Well," cried Dean, exuberantly, "our scheme has worked excellently so far, has it not?"

"Indeed, that is true," agreed Frank.

"Will they not be surprised?"

"Maybe they won't discover our disappearance for a long time yet."

"Then they will take the trail."

"They cannot!"

"Why?"

"The rain has completely obliterated it. They will be baffled."

This was true. Fortune had indeed favored the fugitives.

The Apaches would not discover the fact that the air ship was untraced perhaps for a day or two. Then the fugitives ought to be beyond pursuit.

To outwit those sleuths of the hills was indeed a remarkable thing. There was reason for earnest congratulation.

All that day they remained hidden in the recesses of the butte.

At times they saw trailing columns of smoke ascending from various peaks in the mountain range, and they knew that the Apaches were telegraphing or signaling to each other.

It was plain that they had not discovered the escape yet.

It seemed hard to wait there so idle until nightfall, when during those hours they could have been doubling the distance so easily.

But it was the safest way and therefore the best.

At length nightfall came again. Another dark night was promised.

As soon as possible the party was under way and striking eastward. They knew that by going far enough in this direction they must sooner or later strike a fort or settlement.

On through the night they traveled across the plain. It was a little past midnight when Dean clutched Frank's arm and asked:

"Do you hear anything?"

"Yes!"

"Where?"

"In our rear!"

"What?"

"The tramp of horses!"

"We are pursued!"

Instinctively they sought a vantage point. Rifles were held in readiness, for the pursuers might come right down upon them.

Nearer drew the sounds of horses' hoofs. It could be told easily that it was a large party.

In a very few moments they would either ride down upon or pass the crouching fugitives. Nearer they drew.

Then all drew a breath of relief.

The pursuers, if such they were, were bound to pass them by fully fifty yards to the north. Listening, the fugitives heard startling and comprehensive sounds.

The Apache ponies had not bridles with jingling bits, and the savages did not carry jangling sabers. Then a stern curt voice was heard:

"Close in on the right there! Don't straggle the column!"

Instantly Frank and his companions sprang up with loud cries:

"Hello!"

"Soldiers! Hello!"

"We want help!"

In an instant a stentorian voice called forth:

"Halt!"

The cavalcade ceased its gallop. Then a torch flashed up, and the same voice called:

"Who hails?"

"Fugitives from the Apaches!" cried Dean. "We appeal to you for aid!"

"That is our mission," was the reply. "Come forward and show yourselves."

A moment later our adventurers were in the midst of the troop of United States cavalry, for such they were, being a division of General Crook's raiders.

It was a happy moment for all.

Captain Burton listened to their exciting tale with interest. Then he said, with wonderment:

"So you came down out of those hills? It almost exceeds belief. Why, that is the nest of old Black Wolf, the worst Apache chief in the Southwest. Even our strongest body of troops would hesitate to attack him in his eyrie."

It was learned that Fort Fullerton was about fifty miles distant.

The cavalry was on its way thither under orders. As it would have been madness to attack Black Wolf with such a small band, it was decided to go on to the fort.

"I am afraid you will never recover your air ship, Mr. Reade," said Captain Burton.

"All right!" said Frank, nonchalantly; "I care little for that. I can build another, and am thankful that we have escaped with lives."

As there were led horses in the troop, the four fugitives were mounted and rode on to Fort Fullerton, where they arrived late the next day.

Their story created a sensation at the military post. The commandant received them warmly, and the next day sent them with an escort to the nearest stage station, one hundred miles away.

It was deemed useless to attempt to recover the air ship.

The damaged hull would be of little value, and the stores and fittings would be scattered broadcast among the Apaches.

However, Frank did not feel very bad over the loss.

It was not his way.

When finally they reached civilization all were glad, and Professor Dunderberry Dean declared:

"I can't say that I have not enjoyed the trip across the Milky Way, but all the treasures on earth would not tempt me to try it over again."

"Not even the most urgent interests of science," laughed Frank.

"No, nothing," replied Dean, emphatically. "I have had enough."

"Well, I agree with you," said the young inventor; "when I build my next air ship it will not be to take a trip to the Milky Way."

So ended the wonderful aerial flight. Certainly a more marvelous one has never been recorded.

In due course Frank Reade, Jr., with Barney and Pomp reached Readestown. There they were content to stay for a time.

Nothing was ever again heard of Rinaldo Ray, and his body, or what is left of it, may be yet making its mad orbit through space. It is not likely that human beings will again venture into that awful void which lies between us and the firmament, at least in this generation.

With which let us close this tale.

[THE END.]

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